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Book Reviews

A Fire In His Hand, Ralph A.A.R. Lawrence. Athena Press (2006). Price: £6.99, ISBN 1-84401-617-X

O! who can hold a fire in his hand
By thinking on the frosty Caucasus?

The intriguing title of Ralph Laurence's autobiography concerns man's ability to conquer adversity through strong will and determination – a Shakespearian allusion that is amply demonstrated by this revealing personal history.

The story begins in the South African Asian community into which Ralph was born during the height of the colour bar. The son of a staunch Roman Catholic schoolteacher who emigrated to South Africa from India as a young man and went on to become Mahatma Gandhi's confidential secretary for 6 years, Ralph's early memories centre on the church and his education by Catholic nuns – memories that, despite their subject matter, are nonetheless tainted by the influence of apartheid. Segregation by race was actively condoned by the Catholic Church at the time, as exemplified by the white congregation occupying the central aisles of Durban Cathedral, Indians sitting on the right and Africans on the left. The racial segregation appears to have extended even to the confessional and Ralph recalls a frosty reception from a priest when, as a child, he went to make confession at the cathedral rather than at his 'Indian' parish church.

However, such difficulties pale into insignificance when compared to the appalling restrictions placed on him and other non-white medical students during their undergraduate medical training at the University of Cape Town. Most of the white medical students would have nothing to do with their non-white contemporaries, even to the extent of refusing to sit in the same row in the lecture theatre. The University's refusal to allow non-Europeans to undertake their clinical training in Cape Town led to Ralph's first foray into medical politics and to him successfully steering a resolution to allow full medical training for all students regardless of colour through the annual conference of the National Union of South African Students. As a result of these political endeavours, he became one of the first non-Europeans ever to undertake clinical training in Cape Town, albeit with the proviso that he was forbidden to at-

tend any class, clinic, tutorial, ward round or autopsy involving a white person. Notwithstanding this restriction and his near expulsion for failing to walk out of an orthopaedic tutorial when a white patient was wheeled in, Ralph and two others made history when, in 1945, they became the first non-European doctors to graduate from the University of Cape Town. At that time there were a mere 24 non-European doctors in the whole of South Africa, despite the fact that the non-white population of the country outnumbered the white by 9 million to 2 million.

The difficulties entailed in pursuing a post-graduate medical education in South Africa led to Ralph's decision to continue his studies in the UK, where he eventually settled, married Bronwen Arthur in 1950 and raised his family. The account of his career as a respected general practitioner, an influential medico-politician and an eminent forensic physician will be much better known to his UK colleagues and friends, but is no less impressive despite its familiarity.

This is a somewhat unusual autobiography in that only 60 or so of the near 200 pages are given over to a narrative account – the remainder being a collection of photographs, newspaper cuttings and letters chronicling his achievements. The narrative itself is very much in the vernacular and at times could have done with some more robust editing. But despite these reservations, Ralph's story reminds us that by refusing to be discouraged by life's adversities and by pursuing our dreams with unwavering fortitude, we too can hold a fire in our hands. A fact most poignantly demonstrated when, in May 2002, Ralph returned to the University of Cape Town to accept an appointment as visiting professor of forensic medicine.

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